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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000128

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SUBJECT: 15,000 ARRESTED IN ANTI-CORRUPTION, CRIME SWEEP

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia A. Butenis for reasons 1.4 (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The 15,000 people arrested by police, army, and other security personnel since January 11 include established criminals as well as local and student leaders of both the Awami League and especially the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Seven deaths in custody have been reported. There is conflicting information on whether the government has created a "no-fly list" to block politically prominent persons from leaving the country. Leaders of the former ruling alliance have complained to us the arrests reflect a government bias against it, but the arrests are broadly welcomed by Bangladeshis desperate for respite from insecurity and political confrontation. END SUMMARY

BIPARTISAN ROUND-UP

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12. (SBU) According to statistics provided by the Home Ministry's Press Office, the police, the army, and the paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion have detained over 15,000 people nationwide since the declaration of a state of emergency on January 11. Arrests have averaged between 1,000 and 2,000 a day. Security officials have also seized illegal ammunition and over 100 illegal weapons, often from the homes of politically-linked criminals.

13. (SBU) At least 68 leaders of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party have been detained, including the former ruling party's ex-general secretary from Chittagong, the leader of the party's affiliated union at Chittagong port, a former member of parliament from Narail district, a commissioner of the Dhaka City Corporation, and five student leaders. (The student wings of Bangladesh's political parties are often associated with violence.) One of the highest profile targets is apparently Giasduddin Al Mamun, a close business associate of party Senior Joint Secretary Tarique Rahman. Mamun's house and television station were reportedly raided, and his wife and brother-in-law have reportedly been brought in for questioning on corruption charges. However, Mamun has yet to be located.

14. (SBU) At least 34 leaders of the Awami League have also been detained, including the vice president of the party's Dhaka leadership, a former member of parliament, and six student leaders. According to Jamaat Islami Assistant Secretary General Kamaruzzaman, no known Jamaat leaders have

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been arrested. (Note: Aside from a handful of detainees, Jamaat Islami's violent student group, Chhatra Shibir, is conspicuously removed from this crackdown.)

15. (SBU) While the Caretaker Government has not made any

statements about the arrests, press reports indicate that most are being detained on charges of corruption, extortion, and violence. A representative of the human rights organization Odhikar told us most of the detainees have charges pending against them in the courts, but that some of the detentions occurred under Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which allows police to arrest citizens on "suspicion" of having committed a crime.

NINETEEN DEATHS

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16. (SBU) Human rights organizations have reported 19 deaths in custody or while being arrested since the declaration of a state of emergency. According to Odhikar, eight deaths were from Rapid Action Battalion "crossfire," one from police "crossfire," six in army or police custody, two in the hospital after being detained by police, and two while attempting to flee or avoid arrest. Four of the dead were affiliated with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and two with the Awami League. Three youth activists from the former ruling party, from Khulna, Barisal, and Tangail, died from injuries sustained while in police or army custody. On January 20, a former local Bangladesh Nationalist Party joint secretary died after being taken from an army base to a

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hospital in Chittagong, and an Awami League supporter died in custody in Shariatpur.

NO-FLY LIST?

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17. (C) The day after the state of emergency was declared, the media began reporting that a "no-fly list" had been distributed to airports. Tarique Rahman and several other prominent leaders of the former ruling party are rumored to be on the list. In addition, Awami League Presidium member Kazi Zafarullah told us he was on it. Information from

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government contacts conflicts on whether such a list exists, but many politically prominent persons appear intimidated from trying to leave the country. For instance, Zafarullah told us that although Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina is eager to visit her new granddaughter in Virginia, she feels now is a "poor time" to leave the country.

PARTY REACTIONS MUTED...SO FAR

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18. (C) Reaction from both major parties has been muted, though both have publicly said the government should go about the arrests in a "neutral" manner. Former Foreign Minister Morshed Khan claimed to us that "80 percent" of those arrested were from his Bangladesh Nationalist Party, while another party leader told us arrests in his home district of Faridpur have been overwhelmingly one-sided. "While innocent party people have been arrested, crime syndicate leaders associated with the Awami League remain scot-free." Tarique Rahman acknowledged to us that some of his party's detainees are "naughty" but insisted others are innocent of wrong-doing. A former senior Bangladesh Nationalist Party minister welcomed the arrests of thugs from both parties, but asserted the fact that most detainees are from his party reflects a government bias against it.

COMMENT

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19. (C) Muted reaction from the two major political parties reflects their realization that the Bangladeshi public welcomes the arrests as evidence the new Caretaker Government is serious about restoring public order, battling corruption, and creating a neutral electoral environment. As the huge popularity of the Rapid Action Battalion shows, perceived

boosts for security easily trump due process as a popular priority. It is notable, however, that with the exception of people linked to the widely disliked Tarique Rahman, no senior leaders in either party have yet to be picked up, even though at least half the cabinet of the last government should have grounds for great worry. The state of emergency, for which the government has yet to publish its governing rules, has also muffled criticism of the arrests from human rights NGOs. As long as the Caretaker Government's popular honeymoon continues, though, the arrests are unlikely to become a major political issue. We will continue to press senior government officials to restore and observe basic human rights, including when the Ambassador pays her first call on the Chief Advisor.

BUTENIS